

In Stuttgart, schools go to the mat to keep their students safe

Officials wrestle with logistics so students are spared disruption

By Maria Higgins

In order for the Patch High School wrestling team to compete in a recent tournament in Wiesbaden, it took a series of calculated maneuvers as impressive as anything that happened during the meet.

Several weeks before the event, PHS Assistant Principal Pat Cosby pinned down security details with the military police, German *Polizei*, 6th Area Support Group officials and others. She confirmed such minutiae as which route the bus would take, which parents in attendance spoke German, and who would have cellular telephones handy in the event of an emergency.

"I have to get stringent measures in place if [students] go anywhere," Cosby said. "Their security is our utmost concern."

As coordinator of the high school's force protection efforts – and of its crisis team – Cosby goes to the mat every day to keep all 615 students and some 50 teachers and administrators safe, not only between bells but during after-school and weekend activities as well.

And as the possibility of an escalation in the force protection condition looms, Cosby and her team are ready.

Not that you could ever tell.

"It doesn't look like anything's happening, and that's on purpose," Cosby said. Little fanfare accompanies beefed-up security steps that kick in when conditions warrant.

"The best thing for the kids when we go to different force protection levels is to main-

tain a level of normalcy," she said. "We need to keep their [perspectives] positive."

The safety and well-being activities that are visible to students, such as backpack inspections or counseling inquiries, must walk a fine line, she said.

Cosby said the idea is to remind students of what they need to do to remain safe without triggering a skeptical sense among them of, "OK, what kind of panic is really going on?"

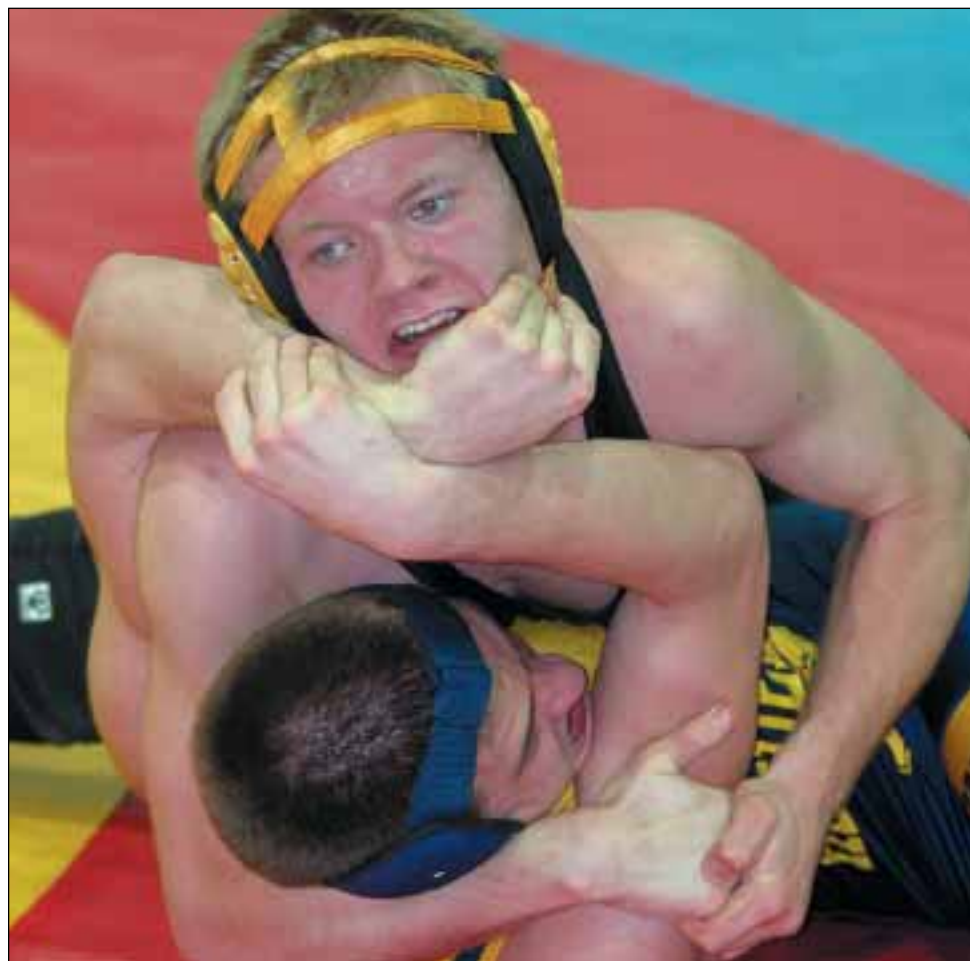
The school, said Cosby, gets excellent support from the 6th ASG – especially from Lt. Col. William Crane, who heads the Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security.

During regular force protection update meetings, Cosby said, Crane supports the notion that schools need to carry on with the least amount of disruption possible, while continuing to be a safe place.

This means, among other things, that Cosby and her colleagues are planning the senior prom well before students even turn their thoughts to dates and dresses, and graduation ceremonies long before spring break, even though a full season of baseball, soccer and track must be safety-managed in the interim.

Having contingency plans for such events – establishing indoor or on-post alternatives for outdoor or off-post locations, for instance – is one way administrators hope to avoid having to cancel cherished activities.

"I can't keep all of the kids in one place," Cosby said, "but I sure need to know where they all are at any given moment."



Hugh C. McBride

Because of a vigilant force protection program, students still have the opportunity to enjoy extracurricular activities such as this PHS wrestling match.

For younger students, force protection is 'elementary'

By Maria Higgins

"Deployment," "crisis intervention" and "evacuation" may be big words for little kids to learn, but 6th Area Support Group elementary school students will be better able to ace these uncertain times precisely because they have been taught about them, said Phyllis Smith, Patch Elementary School counselor.

Smith and fellow counselor Jan Kuenning have been going into each first- through sixth-grade classroom lately to conduct special lessons on deployment and safety.

6th ASG elementary school counselors routinely meet every few months with experts from the Army's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Services division at Heidelberg Hospital, Smith said.

During times of heightened security concerns, the professionals review ideas on maintaining safe schools, handling stress and helping children whose parents may be deploying. "It's great that we have this expertise over there," she said.

One result of the input is that students have practiced lock-down drills and had lessons on evacuation plans. The counselors emphasize to students that "Your teacher knows exactly what to do with you, and you will be taken care of," Smith said.

One teacher reassured students of their safety by explaining "just how far away Iraq is," Smith said. "A lot of them didn't know if it was just outside the gate or 20 minutes away."

This is our children's safe haven. We want them to come and feel secure here.

Phyllis Smith
Patch Elementary School

"This is our children's safe haven," Smith said of the installation schools. "We want them to come and feel secure here."

Together with the teachers, who are all members of the school's Crisis Intervention Team, Smith and Kuenning work to assure children that if one of their parents is deployed, it can be "a positive instead of woe-is-me experience," she said.

Smith said the reaction from students and parents has been very positive.

"The children love to be a part of the classroom discussion, and they like the comfort of knowing someone's here who's checking on them," she said.

"Also, more parents have called and asked us to see their children and make sure they're doing OK, which is just great," Smith said. "Our door is open."

To concerned parents, Smith also extended what may be the most comforting thought: "You can see by [students'] expressions – they're proud of their parents."

Experts send deployment stress packing

"Mrs. Cosby, I'm an Army kid. This is what it's all about."

Patch High School Assistant Principal Pat Cosby has heard this more than once from students. "Our kids are pretty tough," she said. "They know they need to be."

Sometimes, though, they don't mind a little extra help in being so.

In this regard, school administrators are diligent in their efforts to minimize any emotional breaches that may develop in children whose families must deal with deployment, Cosby said.

When deployments occur or are considered imminent, the high school's standing crisis team activates. As a first step, it polls teachers to learn the number of families involved. It's not unusual for the count to include children from families in which neither parent will be departing: Children can pick up on – and be affected by – additional stress that parents with high-level desk jobs bring home, Cosby said.

When "the threat of deployment is there ... [in many cases] an overall tension level sort of permeates" households, said Sue Schmidt, school nurse and crisis team member.

The result is that students "spiral up a little higher," with more of them exhibiting the classic behaviors Schmidt and her colleagues are trained to look for: cutting classes, clashing with peers or parents, claiming real or imagined physical symptoms, and – most confusing to the youngsters – experiencing genuine panic attacks.

"They're concerned about, 'what's going to happen to my parents,'" Schmidt said, "but they don't connect that worry" to their physical discomfort. "They don't understand what's happening to them."

But they are generally willing to talk to adults who do.

Cosby singled out her staff's exceptional rapport with students as an asset in times of stress. "They take it upon themselves to be available and connect," she said.

Schmidt said teenage students may open up more readily with a trusted adult at school than they do with parents. But while she and others can and do assist children with their burdens, she stressed that parental involvement is crucial to keeping a child's anxiety in check. – Maria Higgins